

Carnegie Results

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Carnegie Results is a quarterly newsletter published by Carnegie Corporation of New York. It highlights Corporation-supported organizations and projects that have produced reports, results or information of special note.

The Truth Behind Suicide Terrorism

A Carnegie Scholar's pioneering research project aims to dispel myths and reshape policy.

This is an account of Carnegie Corporation's support for one scholar's research, which opened up new terrain in policy relevant work and continues to influence decision makers at the highest level. Five years after being named a Carnegie Scholar, Robert Pape now heads the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, investigating trends and searching for solutions to critical international security issues facing the U.S. and world community.

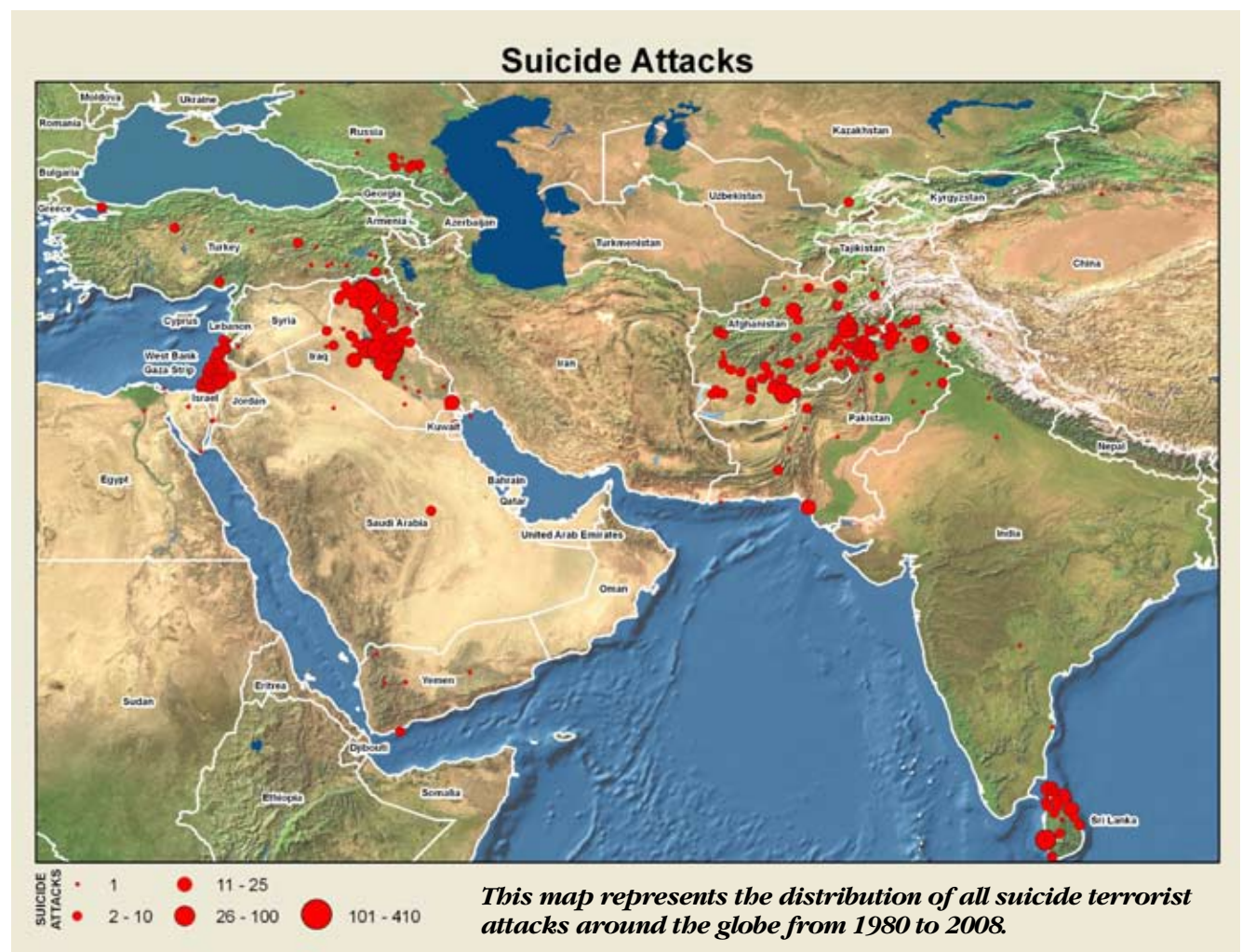
"U.S. Pullout a Condition in Afghan Peace Talks" reads the headline in *The New York Times*. One hundred twenty days into the Obama administration, there's talk of a potential agreement, with the withdrawal of American troops at the top of the Afghanis' list of conditions. This demand will surprise no one familiar with the research of Robert Pape, whose reports on suicide terrorism identify foreign occupation, and not religious extremism, as the fatal trigger.

"What nearly all suicide terrorist attacks actually have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland. Religion is often used in recruiting and in seeking aid from abroad, but is rarely the root cause," Pape wrote in a 2005 *New York Times* op-ed. His conclusion, which de-

fies the popular view of suicide terrorists as Islamic fundamentalists, grew out of investigations begun within days of the collapse of the World Trade Center. He has since written a groundbreaking book and become one of the country's most listened-to authorities on the strategic role of suicide terrorism—an advisor to Congress, the military, the policy world and the media. His research, initially the musings of a curious social scientist, has developed into an ambitious research project dedicated to serious analysis of the ideologies driving today's violent radicalization, and to advising policymakers on strategies for counteracting the relentless growth of global terrorism.

According to Pape, suicide terrorism is first and foremost a social science problem, where researchers attempt to understand the conditions under

which individuals would sacrifice their lives to deliberately kill others. His passion for investigating this problem began unexpectedly on 9/11. Because of his expertise on the effects of air attacks, Pape was invited to appear on TV as a technical expert discussing civilian casualties. Consequently, he was also asked for his opinion on suicide terrorism—a subject on which neither he nor other experts had any factual basis for making judgments. Pape initially assumed suicide terrorism was a product of religious extremism, and he bought a Qur'an to learn “what was wrong with Islam.” At the same time, he began collecting actual data on suicide attacks in order to come to a more accurate conclusion about causes. Before long he had compiled the first complete database of every suicide terrorist attack around the world since 1980.



Analyzing his data, Pape was shocked to find that, of the hundreds of documented attacks, well over half could be considered secular. The world leader in suicide terrorism, he discovered, is the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka (who have reportedly surrendered as this report is being written). This group—which is secular in orientation, adheres to a Marxist political ideology and includes fighters predominantly of Hindu background—has carried out more attacks than either Hamas or Islamic Jihad. Their case supports suicide terrorism as an extreme form of a national liberation strategy—in this case a response to a 20-year period of perceived Sinhalese occupation of the Tamil ancestral homeland. According to Pape, every such campaign since 1980 has been similarly designed to compel a democratic state to withdraw combat forces from territory that the terrorists prize. It is a last-resort strategy of the weak; its purpose to use one's body as a deadly weapon in order to coerce the opposing society to pressure its government into changing military policies. The attacks succeed not only by destroying their targets, but by convincing the opposing society that it is vulnerable to more attacks in the future.

It's just as important to study when suicide terrorism *doesn't* happen as when it *does*, Pape further explains. "Suicide terrorism is like lung cancer. To figure out the causes, you must look at who gets it and who doesn't in order to isolate a clear risk factor. It wasn't until we did those studies in the 1950s and '60s that we saw that there are multiple causes of lung cancer, but one cause stood head and shoulders above the others: smoking. Now we have a similar type of study where we can see that there are multiple causes of suicide terrorism, but one cause is standing out, and it's the presence of foreign combat forces on the territory that the terrorists prize. No suicide campaign has ever been waged against opponents who did not have military forces on territory that is important to the terrorists. Referring to a map (opposite) where the project's current data through 2008 overlay the countries of the Middle East, he emphasizes the importance of areas that show no attacks. "With 1.4 billion Muslims around the world, plotting the data on this map should result in a scattergram of attacks across the region; but that's not how it looks. Suicide terrorism is concentrated in the areas where there is foreign occupation. The cause is not religion, it's occupation."

Speaking Truth to Power

In 2003 Robert Pape was recommended for the Carnegie Scholars Program, which was established by Corporation president Vartan Gregorian in 1999 to provide financial and intellectual support to writers, analysts and thinkers addressing some of the most critical research questions of our time. Don M. Randel, then president of the University of Chicago, recommended Pape as an innovative and meticulous scholar driven by "a strong belief that liberal democracies will require new and innovative solutions to enhance national and global security," and whose work "has important implications for all policymakers in a post-9/11 context." He also emphasized Pape's enthusiasm for sharing his thoughts and research conclusions with domestic and foreign audiences.

Pape sought support for the writing of a book that would explore why suicide terrorism was on the rise, how far it was likely to spread and what could be done to contain the danger. Published in 2005, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Random House) was soon recognized as a field-defining work that changed the nature of the discourse on terrorism. "Today, you can't talk about suicide terrorism without referring to Robert Pape's book," says Patricia Rosenfield, director of the Carnegie Scholars Program. She recalls the excitement of receiving Pape's original proposal, which earned the highest possible scores from reviewers. His "groundbreaking theory and data and his creative analytical framework were exactly what we were looking for in a Carnegie Scholar," she says, and his research was well positioned to shed light on work that was then being done in the International Peace and Security program, without duplicating it. Rosenfield describes Pape as iconoclastic and "willing to speak truth to power....He was prepared to talk about his work, particularly to policymakers, which was vitally important," she adds.

In his 2003 proposal to the Scholars Program, Pape drew on the lessons of 9/11 to help explain the critical need for his research and the new ideas it had already generated. He pointed out that terrorist groups had been relying increasingly on suicide attacks to achieve major political objectives for more than 20 years, citing 16 major campaigns to date—in Lebanon, Chechnya, Kashmir and the West Bank, including those by Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups. He explained that Al

Qaeda, the organization of greatest concern in the U.S., was mobilizing its adherents to kill Americans in order to drive western nations from the Arabian Peninsula and other Muslim countries. Pape's data showed the raw number of suicide terrorist attacks climbing at an alarming rate (from an annual average of 3 up to 30 over the 20-year period) and the fact that it had become the most lethal form of terrorism—13 times deadlier than other forms of attack. The main reason suicide terrorism was increasing steadily, Pape warned, was that time after time, terrorists found that it worked. Each successful incident inspired copycat groups to adopt the same strategy.

Almost all suicide terrorist attacks were carried out as part of coherent campaigns with publicly stated political goals against targets (democratic states) related to those goals. It was these factors and not their faith that motivated suicide terrorists, Pape said. He found that religion, while not a primary influence, enables an organization to win support, creating the appearance of an enemy out to destroy the cultural integrity of the group behind the terrorism. Religion also legitimates martyrdom. The overemphasis of religion, however, the presumption that Islamic fundamentalism must be the “obvious” central cause of suicide terrorism, was dangerously misleading, he warned, because it could encourage domestic and foreign policies likely to worsen America's situation.

Suicide terrorist organizations are not made up of outsiders, but are highly integrated into their communities, Pape discovered, often fostering grassroots activities such as charities, education and other social benefits that build collective identity and political support while aiding recruitment. As to why individuals choose to become suicide terrorists, the research suggests three main incentives: (1) prestige, the desire to be a hero; (2) revenge for atrocities committed against family members or friends and (3) religion (in the context of national resistance). None of these motivations is likely to cause suicide attacks unless fueled by anger at the presence of foreign military, he adds. Pape disputes the accepted psychological profiles of suicide terrorists, who have been generally characterized as uneducated, unemployed, socially isolated young, single men. In contrast, his data showed they were socio-economically average, either college educated or uneducated, married or single, men or women,

socially isolated or integrated and just about any age from fifteen to fifty.

Understanding that suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation rather than a product of Islamic fundamentalism has important implications for how the United States and its allies should conduct the war on terrorism. If self-determination were the terrorists' goal, he argues, the conquest of Muslim countries in order to “transform them” is likely to backfire, fueling even more violence. Conquering countries, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, would only increase the number of suicide terrorists coming at us. While it was hoped that Western counterterrorism efforts would have weakened Al-Qaeda by now, the group's ability to kill us is actually stronger today than before 9/11.

Pape says America needs a new strategy that pursues our vital interest in oil but does not stimulate the rise of a new generation of suicide terrorists. We need to focus on keeping the peace from a discrete distance, minimizing the U.S. military footprint and encouraging other countries in the region to help stabilize Iraq and isolate Islamic extremists. Over the longer term, he recommends shifting to an alternate military strategy that he calls offshore balancing, which was successfully employed by the U.S. before 1990. This approach involves a combination of strategic political alliances and military might: specifically, aircraft carriers and air power backed up forces close enough — either in ships or in bases near the region — to allow rapid deployment of ground troops in a crisis. “It's a strategy we can maintain for decades,” Pape says, “which is how long it will take to produce true alternative sources of energy.”

Broadening the Policy Debate

Significantly, in the Corporation's view, even before Pape's book appeared, the results of his extensive research, which he had written about in periodicals and academic journals, and which were widely discussed as a result of media appearances and high-level meetings, gave rise to policy recommendations. Once Pape's book hit the shelves and he became the country's foremost expert on suicide terrorism, his calendar filled with closed-door conferences with policymakers. “It's terribly important for those people to be able to look someone in the eye and ask them direct questions after

they've actually seen the data," he says. "And it's very important to know that there are no cameras in the room." The meetings, often over breakfasts and lunches, were largely free of politics. As one prominent member of the administration put it, "We want to know who's trying to kill us and why," Pape recalls, adding that quite a few people in Washington are more interested in the facts than one might think.

For Pape, "being a Carnegie Scholar enabled me to complete my book several years earlier than expected, which led to endless talks. Right after the book came out I spoke at the Council on Foreign Relations, the National War College, to members of Congress, the Department of Defense, Department of Justice, the international relations department of Stanford, Harvard, Princeton and others. All these things happened because the book came out in time to actually influence political debate." Along the way, Pape was invited to advise the Obama campaign, and later Ron Paul made him his campaign's foreign policy advisor. "Were it not for my being a Carnegie Scholar," he adds, "my book would just be coming out now."

Pape envisioned the research going further yet by bringing more people and original ideas to the enterprise. The Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, a team of scholars from academic institutions across the United States, led by Pape, was brought together to create new knowledge and foster innovative foreign and defense policy initiatives in the interests of international peace. They sought support from Carnegie Corporation's International Program for dissemination of their original scholarship through a variety of accessible forums, engagement with the media and presentations to government, academic and community audiences worldwide, and received a two-year grant beginning in 2008. As Rosenfield notes, "One of the aims of the Scholars Program is to extend the boundaries of the Corporation's grants programs. In winning support for a grant that builds on his fellowship results and introduces new thinking into programmatic work, Pape further reinforces the significance of his achievements."

The Chicago Project team works on three main types of activities: (1) updating and analyzing a complete worldwide knowledge base of suicide terrorist attacks, martyr videos and suicide terrorist interviews; (2) conducting original research proj-

ects aimed at better understanding the complexity and diversity of Muslim states and societies and the costs of military strategies commonly used against them; (3) expanding the debate on suicide terrorism through a range of publications as well as a major new Web site (under construction) with a searchable database. The project, which employs the multidisciplinary approach characteristic of the University of Chicago, stresses the intersection of social, economic, religious, psychological and strategic dimensions of the study of terrorism and national security affairs. At the same time, it adheres to the mission of Carnegie Corporation's Islam Initiative, which studies Muslim communities and contemporary thought, and encourages interdisciplinary projects that use specialized scholarly studies to illuminate diverse worldviews and ways of life.

Having benefited from the Carnegie Scholar's Program, Pape, now a grantee of the Islam Initiative, is able to venture even further into untested territory to probe a wider range of policy relevant ideas. Pape's Chicago Project team has an ambitious agenda, which includes publication of a special interest journal, opinion pieces in major newspapers and policy journals based on the research, multiple Ph.D. dissertation and predissertation research articles and proposals, presentations at national and international symposiums and a public conference in Washington, D.C. Hillary Wiesner is program director of the Islam Initiative, which aims to bring academic expertise about Muslim societies to wider publics. Wiesner was eager to support Pape and the "amazing group of grad students, who are doing first class work, but perhaps are overstretched and underresourced." She was impressed by the way they brought social science to bear on national security issues, illuminating a "complex cocktail of political, psychological and sociological factors. Pape was able to show that the problem of suicide terrorism is inherently multicausal," she explains. "He introduced numbers into the picture and broke through the prevailing paradigm.

"We like facts," Wiesner stresses. "It's not about being for or against. Just the facts. Pape's work embodies the mission of our program." She applauds the way he was able to dispel popular assumptions about the roles played by ideology or "irrationality" or nondeterrability. Wiesner is also enthusiastic about the new angles the Chicago Project is currently exploring, including a special study

of female suicide terrorists and another on the outcome of organizational decapitation—removal of the leaders of terrorist subgroups. “The findings are surprising,” she says.

The research on female terrorists is being led by University of Chicago Ph.D. student Lindsey O'Rourke. She wrote an op-ed on the subject, which ran in *The New York Times* in August 2008.¹ O'Rourke reported finding “precious little evidence of uniquely feminine motivations driving women's attacks.” Having surveyed all known female suicide attacks throughout the world since 1981—in Afghanistan, Israel, Iraq, India, Lebanon, Pakistan, Russia, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and Uzbekistan—to determine their motives, she compared the data with a database of all known suicide attacks over that period compiled by the Chicago Project. As O'Rourke writes, “This research led to a clear conclusion; the main motives and circumstances that drive female suicide attackers are quite similar to those that drive men.” Without a new American strategy, she warns, we're likely to see an increasing number of Iraqi women killing themselves and their countrymen in an effort to end what they consider the occupation of their nation.

Jenna Jordan, also a University of Chicago political science doctoral student, has completed the first major study of leadership elimination in over 300 terrorist groups from World War II to 2007. Her work shows that contrary to conventional wisdom, decapitation is rarely effective, especially in a group's first few years of existence, since 50 percent of these groups fall apart anyway. Leaders are assumed to be crucial to the functioning of terrorist organizations, and removing them has been a principal goal in the war on terror. But according to Jordan, established terrorist organizations are more likely to fall apart if governments target members of their upper echelons rather than simply removing their leaders, and the strategy of leadership targeting is far less effective against religious organizations compared to secular groups. She concludes that “capturing Osama bin Laden may fulfill Americans' calls for justice, but would do little to enhance our security.”² Chicago Project member and MIT

doctoral candidate Nicole Argo spent two years in Israel and the Palestinian Territories as a researcher for the Preventive Defense Project at Stanford, interviewing would-be suicide bombers and members of their communities. The next year, funded by the United States Institute for Peace, she studied the role that relationships play in bomber mobilization, as well as weak-against-strong resistance in general. Her survey of more than 350 households, which compares the relative recruitment power of community versus individual motivation, finds resistance to occupation is still the driver in suicide terrorism.

The team's latest undertaking is the Martyr Video project, which aims to establish the first such archive available for analysis in the United States, Europe or other major centers for the study of terrorism. Over 100 martyr videos from around the world are being collected through various sources, including Al Jazeera, translated and made available to researchers, modelers and other experts for analysis. The Chicago Project is testing audience reaction to these videos around the Muslim world (a pilot test has already been conducted in Turkey), comparing the effectiveness of the political versus religious message to determine which of these appeals is most important to prospective suicide terrorists. Test participants will be in their twenties and thirties, and of various religious backgrounds. The University of Chicago-affiliated National Opinion Research Center, a recognized leader in studying the psychology of empathy, will help analyze the results.

Bigger Populations, Bigger Problems

The Chicago Project's latest data on suicide terrorism reinforce Pape's earlier conclusions, and point to an ever-growing danger. “First of all, we have been seeing suicide terrorism as a problem with Islam because we are occupying Muslim countries,” he says. “It's not as though Iraq *isn't* a Muslim country. And it has a big population! Our occupation of Iraq has led to a tenfold increase in suicide terrorism. Even U.S. intelligence officials consider the presence of American combat troops in Iraq the single most effective recruiting tool for Islamic militants. The increase in attacks is a direct function of the higher populations of the occupied countries. We are occupying Muslim countries we have not occupied before,” he continues, “and as the populations go up, the order of magnitude of attacks increases.” To illustrate his point, Pape provides rough popula-

¹“Behind the Woman Behind the Bomb” by Lindsey O'Rourke, *The New York Times*, August 2, 2008

² Jenna Jordan; *When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation* http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/2/7/8/9/7/pages278972/p278972-1.php

tion figures: West Bank: 3 million; Iraq: 29 million; Afghanistan: 28 million; Pakistan: 180 million.

The data in *Dying to Win*, covering 1980 to 2001, documented 315 suicide attacks in all. By the summer of 2008 the total had grown to over 1,550. In 2001, there were 50 attacks; in 2008, there were 500. Iraq is the largest campaign, with 856 attacks; Afghanistan comes next, with 316. The popularity of suicide terrorism is growing as a result of ground operations, Pape maintains: 89 percent of all suicide terrorism around the world since the Iraq war is the direct result of troops on the ground. His data show that of nearly 1,600 suicide attacks, 95 percent are against *all* foreign occupying forces, with 90 percent of those against just U.S. forces. "This is a *very* bad thing," he believes.

Asked whether he felt his many appearances on Capitol Hill to present these increasingly dramatic findings have had any impact on U.S. policy, Pape points to developments in Anbar Province since 2006. If suicide terrorists were nothing but "irrational fanatics" there would have been no way to make deals with them, he says. But if there are rational elements, we can use economic or political carrots. With the Anbar strategy, U.S. officials started to look for tools; offering political power to tribes was one, giving insurgents money to stop fighting was another. "Is it religious fanaticism or logic that's at work? If it were irrational there would be no need for policy tools," he concludes.

Today, Pape is focused on Afghanistan and, again, the key objective must be to reduce land forces. He sees the rise of attacks throughout Afghanistan as the direct result of the United States' increasing occupation of the Pashtun homeland. For the first couple of years of our occupation of Afghanistan, we stayed in Kabul. Then we began occupying the rest of the country in stages, reaching southern and eastern Afghanistan in late 2005, and bringing on a surge of suicide bombings. "As we move to the border of Pakistan, we're seeing more of the same," he warns. "Seventy-five percent of attacks have been where there are Pakistani ground troops—our surrogate."

Pape says what we're seeing is that U.S. combat operations are driving suicide terrorism around the world, which makes him question the efficacy of sending new troops into Afghanistan. Bringing another 20,000 troops isn't likely to make matters better, he believes. It's the worst of both worlds: not enough for stability, but enough to threaten the

political and social structure of the Pashtun homeland, generating more local opposition. "If we're not prepared to put in half a million troops, then we have to think about using political and economic levers," he argues. "Our present actions are not transformative. When we come into their country and eradicate poppies, for instance, it puts us in the position of controlling the Afghan economy with military force. Instead of coercively destroying economies and giving people no alternatives to provide for their family, the U.S. should opt for aggressive economic reconstruction."

The Chicago Project's next major endeavor takes them from terrorism toward exploration of America's massive decline in power. A nation's relative power is based on its economic wealth compared to the rest of the world. In 2000, the U.S. controlled 31 percent of the world economy; in 2008, that figure had fallen to 23 percent and, according to the International Monetary Fund, the projection for 2013 is 21 percent. In the past eight years, the United States has lost one-third of its economic wealth or, put another way, since 2000, the U.S. has lost nearly a third of its relative power in international politics while China's has doubled and Russia's has tripled. This decline represents the largest drop in the history books, Pape says. Our international decline was well under way before the economic downturn of 2008, which is likely to further weaken our influence. The Iraq war, growing government debt and myriad unwise decisions resulting in economic weakness have cost the U.S. real power in today's world. "If present trends continue, we will look back at the previous administration's term as the death knell of American domination," he predicts.

Pape says that in the 1990s, when the Cold War ended, the U.S. expanded its commitments and has kept right on doing so. "By 2002, we told ourselves we could fight in Iraq *and* hold Afghanistan, but we couldn't. Now the Obama administration faces enormous global commitments, yet with far less wealth and therefore far less power. What more can Obama do when we're still pinned down in the Middle East? In a world in which military force solves problems, our ability to use heavy military force is coming unglued. And while there are limits to military power, it can still serve some purposes, such as winning wars and destroying conventional armies." There is a relationship to terrorism here, Pape argues, and it's the issue of how you value your military instruments, particularly ground

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troops. Add to that the possibility of terrorist organizations acquiring nuclear or chemical weapons, and it becomes painfully clear how seriously wrong America's decisions have been.

Pape's next book, tentatively called *Myths of Power: Why Strong States Make Colossal Mistakes*, will explore the strategic missteps that brought America to its weakened state. Hillary Wiesner sees that book as an opportunity to widen the scope and impact of Pape's work, alerting the public and policymakers to the ways persistent fallacies yield the opposite of our desired outcomes. "It's this thinking that makes Pape so necessary as a public scholar," she says. Having established suicide terrorism as a powerful example of the fact that using force for massive transformation can backfire, Pape says it's time for the United States to be more modest. Under present conditions, multilateralism isn't just nice, he says, it's necessary; this is the inescapable reality that informs the Obama administration's diplomacy.

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